



RANTS & RAVES

While Mel Croucher celebrates the online triumph of experience over youth, Simon Edwards finds that sometimes it's best to put the old ones out to pasture

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Mel Croucher **RAVES**

In my considered opinion, the most important changes in UK computing have nothing to do with hardware or software, and everything to do with people. Over the first five years of this new millennium, a new mass market of consumers has established itself, and it will grow over the next five years until its demands dominate the marketplace. And yet most of the industry is completely ignoring it.

Did you read all those tedious items about the 19-year-old from Paisley and his treatment for

addiction to emails and text messages? It cost him hundreds of pounds a month. But frankly, my dears, we don't give a damn.

Why is this young gentleman's idiotic behaviour worthy of column inches? The fashion industry may be obsessed by youth, the nation's pubs may pander to youth, and God help us the computer press may be infatuated by youth, but youth ain't where it's at. Young people are worse than skint, they're up to their eyeballs in student loans and credit card debt. Whereas members of the new mass market can blow thousands of quid online, but they don't feature in the press. So allow me to put that right. I'm talking about the dude with the dough, the honey with the money, the silver

surfer with squillions to squander. I'm talking about the old!

GOLDEN OLDIES

Youngsters spend their McMoney on computerised ephemera. Cheap, here-today-gone-tomorrow stuff for a few quid. Ringtones, logos, music downloads and all those fckn txt mssgs. But at the other end of the demographic scale, the paid-off mortgage brigade is shopping online for luxury cruises costing thousands of pounds, motor caravans costing tens of thousands and equity-release products worth hundreds of thousands. They also buy a hell of a lot of food, wine, books and tickets online.

Old people are not only financially savvy, they are

increasingly internet savvy, too. Sixty per cent of people approaching retirement regularly use the internet, and over half of them already bank and shop online. That's double the national average, and the inescapable fact is that the online population is growing older because people are living longer. The latest report from the Future Foundation reveals that these new waves of silver surfers were introduced to the web via their work, and the online spending power of the over-60s will dominate by 2010. In other words, there's a revolution on the way.

In the latest Equal Opportunities survey of 1,000 commercial websites, over 80 per cent failed the most basic access requirements, because they were plagued by unnecessary gimmicks designed by and aimed at fatuous youth. So this is a wake-up call to the online business world. You are throwing away billions if you fail to capture your slice of this hugely lucrative new market. Grab a granny, pleasure a pensioner, milk the mature. And while you're at it, scrap the crap on your websites aimed at impoverished juveniles. There's a gold mine in the silver surf – all you have to do is extract its riches.



LIES, DAMN LIES AND PR

Simon
Edwards **RANTS**

You don't know how lucky you are. By the time you get to read your monthly dose of computer news (on pages 270 to 274), we've already sought out and carefully researched the most useful, interesting stories around. Part of this task involves reading a load of guff sent to us by companies that are hopeful of a name check in a story. These emails and letters are usually trashed and forgotten. But I've got to tell you about a press release that turned up on the newsdesk this month, if only so you can share our pain and appreciate us all the more.

Napster has commissioned a survey on the nation's music habits. This doesn't promise to make gripping reading, but its conclusions are interesting to say the least. Apparently, UK music fans have lost a total of two billion records and CDs over an undisclosed period of time. The reason given is that they have either been borrowed and not returned by friends or just stolen. This means that the average person

loses 37 out of a total collection of 126 CDs, tapes or LPs. That's nearly a third of someone's music stash, which shows we have a remarkably poor choice in friends, if nothing else.

Picking through the quite incomprehensible conclusions scattered throughout, we find that Napster has made various deductions. These don't appear to be related to each other in every case, so don't get upset if you're confused.

Apparently, we are frustrated "with traditional music formats – particularly CDs" and this is "helping drive take-up of digital services". We lend our music to unreliable friends, or fail to secure it against thieves. We don't even listen to much of our music. We listen to only half of our physical collection. There is no mention of how many of our MP3s we listen to. Presumably, those of us who convert our CDs to MP3 fail to listen to half of our digital collection.

ALIEN TRACKS FIEND

The next bit is quite sinister. We find it hard to find the music we want in

the shops, so 42 per cent of us don't bother to go shopping on the high street. But only 20 per cent buy online. What happened to the other 22 per cent? Were they abducted by aliens? Have a close look at the Napster logo. Looks extra-terrestrial, doesn't it? Maybe Napster is behind this. Or did those surveyed just lose interest in music and give up?

Then there's the discovery that MP3 players and PCs are more popular than hi-fi systems. I wonder if portability has something to do with the popularity of MP3 players? Napster lumps the figures for MP3 player and not-so-portable PCs into one, so we can only guess.

And we'll not be the only ones guessing. One bit of conjecture, which will almost certainly be picked up by tabloids and young women's lifestyle magazines and presented as fact, is that the reason many people are opting to download music rather than buying it "could be [because of] partners gaining custody of [CDs] when relationships end".

There are some other possibilities I would like to pose. Could it be because they can't work iTunes and copy their CDs to a new MP3 player? Or maybe they don't do that because it would, technically, be illegal in the UK.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT

Just to disgress slightly, if you haven't heard Mr Blunt's hit *You're Beautiful*, be grateful. It's possibly the most self-absorbed, sentimental piece of awful teenage poetry you'll find outside of a school exercise book. The basic premise, set in a minor key of course, is that he was travelling through a subway and saw a girl he fancied. It sounds like she gave him the eye back, but she was with another bloke so the moment

passed. But now James is sad. He'll never be with her, you see, and he "don't know what to do". The video shows him neatly shedding his clothes in preparation for a watery suicide bid. Or he's going to swim the Channel in his trousers. Maybe someone told him there were plenty more fish in the sea.

Anyway, Napster says that "the biggest issue here is actually keeping hold of the CDs, vinyl and cassettes". And they get scratched, which is apparently the biggest complaint from the 1,000 people in the unimpressively small national sample. The solution, as you might expect from an online music downloads company, is to download your music. Because, as we all know, MP3 players, PCs and their hard disks are incredibly reliable devices that will never be targeted by thieves or fail to operate.

DISK BITES DUST

Simon
Edwards **RANTS**

"Every computer problem has a silver lining when you write a column like *Rants & Raves*," said the editor. The reason for his optimism, and my impending mental breakdown, was the death of my

laptop – again. It appeared to bite the dust a while back, but it turned out to be a dodgy hard disk cable. This time, it was serious.

The Windows XP blue error screen is never a reassuring sight, but when it says Unmountable_Boot_Volume the old circulation sure gets moving, along with other things. Microsoft's relevant support page accuses you of installing new hardware or software and demands that you uninstall it. Doing so wipes the slate clean, and it will all work again. In my case, I'd done no such thing, and the website said that the only available option was to boot into the Windows Recovery Console and run the Chkdsk repair utility. But I wasn't going to fall for that one.

Disk repair programs do one of two things to a dying hard disk. The least favourable option is to render any data stored on it unreadable, while the all-too-rare alternative is to restore the disk to rude health. I didn't trust the laptop or the disk, and removed the latter for surgery.

UNDERSIZE ME

We've got a few mini-ITX computer systems lying around. These are excellent little PCs that are about the size of a computer manual, being about 10 inches long (from front to back), eight inches wide and three inches high. To squash everything into these tiny cases, you need to use laptop components, such as ultra-thin DVD drives, low profile memory chips and 2½" hard disks. To connect one of these disks to a regular IDE port on the motherboard also requires a special adaptor. We pressed one of these into service.

I hooked the laptop's disk up to a desktop PC using the adaptor. Turning on the computer, I held the small storage unit in my hand. As the power came on I felt it flutter, like the faint heartbeat of a tiny, scared animal. Would the little guy make it through the night? I laid it down on a bed of anti-static bags.

To cut a long story short, a rollercoaster though it is, the little nipper beat the odds and running Chkdsk worked a treat. But I'm afraid the future for old faithful isn't looking bright. I've bought a faster, larger and 'less old' replacement. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. **CS**

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